

Main conclusions of survey among Political Journalists in the United Kingdom

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The relation between journalists and politicians is a hot topic. The Centre for Journalism of the University of Southern Denmark asked journalists who cover politics in Westminster about their view on this issue by means of a survey. The data collection took place between June 2008 and January 2009. 89 journalists participated (response rate 32%). The group of respondents is representative in terms of gender and the medium they work for.

This survey is part of an international comparative research project involving Germany, Denmark, Spain and the United Kingdom (see annex). This report provides a first overview of the findings of the British part of this project.

The study shows that parliamentary journalists believe they have an influence on politics, especially concerning setting the political agenda, during elections and on the careers of individual politicians. However, politicians, specifically the government, are still considered the primary definers of the political agenda. Journalists see analysis and interpretation as their most important tasks. Journalists covering Westminster politics feel that the competition with other media influences their work, while direct commercial pressure from shareholders or advertisers seems absent.

Who is the British parliamentary journalist?

British political journalists are predominantly male. Their average age is 43, with 20 years of experience in journalism. 18 per cent of the British journalists covering national politics have an education in journalism. We asked parliamentary reporters about their own political leaning and the political leaning of the medium they work for. The large majority of parliamentary reporters see themselves as middle oriented. About one fourth of British political journalists have a left political leaning (table 1a). Over four fifth of the parliamentary journalists see the political leaning of the medium they work for as middle oriented. Nine per cent work for media with a left political leaning and eight per cent see his or her medium as being right wing orientated (table 1b).

Table 1a: The political leaning of British parliamentary journalists (%)

Left political leaning	26
Middle political leaning	63
Right political leaning	11
Total	100

Table 1b: The political leaning of British media according to British parliamentary journalists (%)

Left political leaning	9
Middle political leaning	83
Right political leaning	8
Total	100

Power of the media

Table 2 ranks the actors with most influence on the political agenda. Following the prime minister and ministers, the written press is seen as being most influential on the political agenda. Two thirds of the journalists think that radio and television are often or very often able to place new issues on the political agenda. The agenda setting power of the media contrasts with the members of parliaments' possibilities of placing new issues on the agenda. Only half of the journalists think that the MPs are often able to do so. The influence of interest groups and think tanks is limited. These findings show that the media are an important player in politics.

However, it would be going too far to say that the British parliamentary system is a *mediacracy*, where politics is taken over by the media. Politicians, and more specifically the government and the political parties, most often take the lead. In line with these findings, only one fourth of the journalists believe that the media have more influence than politicians when deciding which issues are important (table 3). This does not mean that the media is considered powerless, especially in times of election (according to 70%) and for the career of individual politicians (according to 64%). While one third of the journalists think that the power of the media is overrated, the same share of the journalists thinks that their influence is too big.

Table 2 Political agenda

How often do the following actors manage to place an issue on top of the political agenda? (percentage saying often or very often)

Prime minister	93
Ministers	90
Written press	76
Parties	69
Radio and television	63
Members of Parliament	52
Interest groups	33
Think tanks	26

Table 3: Media power

(percentage saying (totally) agree)

The political power of the media is larger in times of elections	70
The mass media make and break politicians	64
The power of the media is overrated	34
The mass media have too much political power	31
It's the media who decide which issues are important, politics has little influence on this matter	24

Table 4: Influence on politics and the public

How big is, according to your opinion, the influence of the following media on politics and on the public? (percentage saying some to large influence)

	Influence on politics	Influence on the public
Newspapers	93	87
Television	91	93
Radio	74	70
Magazines	32	31
Websites	32	26

In line with the findings presented in table 2, newspapers are seen as the media with the most influence on politics, followed by television (table 4). The roles of magazines and websites in British politics are smaller than the influence of the daily press and the audiovisual media. We see a similar pattern for the influence of different types of media on the public with the exception that television is perceived as more influential than newspapers.

Reporting style

Table 5: Journalistic roles

How important are the following goals in your work as political journalists? (Percentage saying (very) important)

Provide analysis and interpretation	93
Investigate claims and statements from the government	88
Get information to the public quickly	86
Follow developments in politics and the economy in a critical and sceptical way	74
Give ordinary people a chance to express their views	62
Provide entertainment and relaxation	49
Set the political agenda	44
Give attention to the private life of politicians	15
Serve as platform for certain groups in society	13

Table 5 provides insight into which aspects of their work parliamentary reporters value most. The journalists want to provide analysis and interpretation, be a watchdog and bring news quickly. Roughly two thirds think it is important to give room for vox pop. Only a minority wants to have a direct political influence by setting the political agenda (44%) or by serving as a platform for certain groups in society (13%). About half of the parliamentary journalists think it is important to provide entertainment but that does not mean that they want to focus on the private lives of politicians in their work. The flipside

of being a democratic watchdog which British journalists find important, is that parliamentary journalism is usually driven by incidents, according to two thirds of the reporters, and that political journalism is too cynical, according to half of them (table 6).

Table 6: Reporting style

percentage saying (totally) agree

Political coverage is usually driven by incidents	65
Political journalism these days is too cynical	50
The main thing journalists are after these days is a sensational story that draws a large audience	41
Too often, journalists give their own interpretation of what happens in politics	21

Relation with politicians

Table 7: Politicians' communication roles

According to you, how important are the following motives for members of parliament when they communicate through the media? (percentage saying important or very important)

Make their party stand out positively in comparison to other parties	99
Reach their constituency, the people who voted for them	98
Defend their party's standpoints	93
Participate in the public debate	77
Test public reactions to possible parliamentary initiatives	65
Be accountable for the decisions they make	53
Reveal more about themselves as a person	31
Give information to citizens in an open and neutral way	22

Journalists think that politicians mainly present themselves in the media as partisan actors who defend the interests of their party and aim their communication at their potential voters (table 7). That politicians use the media as a platform for party politics is underlined by the fact that only 22 per cent of the journalists believe that politicians communicate in an open and neutral way. Only one third think MPs focus on their personality and private life in their media communication. Most journalists see spokespersons and communication specialists as a reality rather than an inhibiting factor to do their work (table 8). 40 per cent believe that media coverage is so important for politicians that they would do anything to get attention from the media.

Table 8: Politicians’ communication style

(percentage saying agree or totally agree)

Politicians would do anything to get attention from the media	40
Spokespersons and other communication specialists inhibit journalists in their job	35
It’s more important for a politician to get coverage in the media than to work hard	23
Politicians gain most of their popularity by appearing on entertainment programmes on television	20

Influence on daily work

Do competition, economic goals and political pressure influence the daily work of parliamentary reporters? According to 77 per cent of the parliamentary reporters, competition with other media has an influence on their work (table 9). Only a minority of parliamentary journalists believe that commercial pressure on the profession influences them, like budget cuts, share holders or advertisers. Political pressure is felt by eight per cent of the journalists. We asked journalists what they consider the most important limitation of their freedom to do their work. The most commonly mentioned limitations were lack of time and resources for thorough research, the editorial line of the medium they work for and the culture of spin and secrecy among the government.

Table 9: Influence on daily work

How much influence do the following factors have on your daily work as a journalist? (percentage saying ‘some’ to ‘large influence’)

Competition with other media	77
Audience figures	31
(threats of) budget cuts	17
Political pressure	8
Share holders	2
Advertisers	1

Annex: Project description Political Journalism in Comparative Perspective

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News about politics is the outcome of interactions between political actors and journalists. Previous research on the emergence of news about politics and the effects this news has on public opinion and thinking about politics is rather fragmented.

This collective research project has the explicit goal of integrating two strands of research. On the one hand, it focuses on journalists and it, on the other hand, focuses on the effects that different types of political news reporting have on citizens.

Given recent observations suggesting that the news media treats political topics differently than previously, the project has 3 goals: (1) To investigate journalists' attitudes towards covering politics; (2) to define, identify and analyze different types of political news reporting; and (3) to investigate the effects of different types of political reporting on issue understanding, knowledge acquisition, and opinions about political issues. The approach is cross-nationally comparative, and the project includes countries (Denmark, Britain, Germany, and Spain) which represent different media systems.

The project includes two PhD projects and relies on a survey among political reporters and editors, a content analysis of the news media's coverage of politics and a number of controlled experiments to test the effects of different types of political reporting.

This research enhances our understanding of how news about politics emerges and the effects it has on public opinion.

The project is supported through a grant from the Danish Social Science Research Council in the amount of 4.1 million Danish kroner and began in the middle of August 2007 with hiring of two PhD students. The project will run over the course of three years.

Source:

http://www.sdu.dk/Om_SDU/Institutter_centre/C_Journalistik/Forskning/Forskningsprojekter/Igangvaerende_forskning/Politisk%20journalistik.aspx